

Kol HaRav

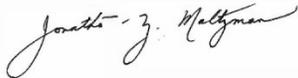
A rabbi once described his life and career in terms of three punctuation marks—a hyphen, a question mark, and an exclamation point—to suggest different aspects of his rabbinate and one, the period that marks the end of a sentence, that he doesn't hold to. Let me explain.

Rabbis are the professional equivalent of hyphens because we serve within our communities as agents of linkage, as the living bridges that attach the souls of discrete human beings to each other and bind them—as individuals and as a community of linked souls—to God. Rabbis are also question marks because, at least ideally, we serve our communities precisely by stimulating thoughtful, respectful debate. In Martin Buber's *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism* he writes that true faith can always be recognized because it is the kind of belief that never stops challenging the heart and the mind. The rabbi-as-question-mark concept, however, is only truly meaningful when paired with the model of the rabbi as exclamation point. A rabbi can never be content solely with stimulating questions: there also have to be answers, even tentative ones.

And then there is the one thing that that a rabbi isn't and can never be: the period at the end of a sentence. In other words, rabbis should specifically not have the final word on what people believe, but instead should feel charged with speaking the first word, the one that stimulates creative thinking and the kind of productive, ruminative introspection that prompts individuals to develop into finer versions of their earlier Jewish iterations.

I'm sure you understand that I've been thinking a lot lately about what it means to be a rabbi. I've come to the realization that in the end, the journey is everything...but the job of rabbis is not to take congregants along with them on their own personal journeys, but to help those congregants find the fortitude to make their own individual way forward on their private paths towards their personal redemption. A rabbi cannot be the period at the end of someone else's sentence!

After all these years, I can't think of a way outside the rabbinate I would have preferred to make my mark on the world, nor can I think of an avenue of personal self-expression that would have been more gratifying or satisfying. The old joke has it that being a rabbi is no way for a Jewish boy—now girl—to earn a living...but it's been a good life for me, one filled both with professional and spiritual satisfaction. I'm occasionally asked if I would pursue a career in the rabbinate if I had the choice to make all over again, if I were somehow back to being an undergraduate contemplating the different career paths that were open to me. The answer for me is that, yes, I would. Even with knowing all that I've learned in the intervening years, I'd still opt for a life in the rabbinate, and especially these past seventeen years serving all of you.



Rabbi Jonathan Z. Maltzman